Discard Studies

Professor: Robin Nagle

Course Day/Time: W 2:00pm - 4:30pm

Course Description: Discard Studies is a new interdisciplinary field that considers dynamics and consequences of waste, broadly defined. It draws on a diverse range of research methods, literatures, and scholarly networks that explore central questions of sustainability, health, and the environment, with a scope that extends from the microscopic -- witness recent revelations about microplastics in drinking water -- to the global; international trade relations, for example, can foster or destroy recycling initiatives around the world.

This class considers practical questions about living in a throw-away society while exploring deeper cultural conventions that mark disposability as a belief system, an economic pattern, and a set of behaviors. We’ll study the history and infrastructure of solid waste, consider how discard habits reflect historically new relationships to time, examine the challenge of defining and managing various categories of waste, and survey economic and political effects of our cast-offs in a global context.

We’ll investigate these and other themes through many forms of engagement; these will include visits from guest speakers, field trips, and studying academic journal articles, scholarly websites, environmental and mainstream news sources, documentary films, movies, radio programs, podcasts, and even (perhaps) live theater. Students will explore these through written assignments, peer editing, presentations, individual research projects, and regular reflections inspired by a series of practice-experiments.